September 21, 2009 - Army Times: Pattern of Failure Army Knew by 2006 UCP a Poor Choice

Army Times

www.armytimes.com

Army Times: Pattern of failure
Army knew by 2006 UCP a poor choice

By Matthew Cox, Army Times

September 21, 2009

The Army has known since 2006
that it outfits soldiers with an inferior camouflage pattern — but has taken no
action to correct the problem until now.

Two studies by the Army Natick
Soldier Systems
Center and one by Army
Special Operations Com-mand show that the Army’s Uni-versal Camouflage Pattern,
now criticized by soldiers and Con-gress, performs poorly when pitted against
other camouflage pat-terns.

The two-year study completed
in March 2009 confirmed what Army experts concluded in 2006: that the Army’s
UCP is less effective than other patterns available since 2002, well before the
Army adopted the current camouflage for the Army Combat Uniform.

Officials released the 2009 Nat-ick study Sept. 14 in
response to a Freedom of Information Act request filed by Army Times.

Although the Army demonstrat-ed
the ability to rapidly field other changes to soldiers’ combat equip-ment
during the same period — the latest advancements in soldier and vehicle armor,
for example — officials failed to move with the same urgency when it came to
effective camouflage.

Rep. John Murtha, D-Pa., chair-man
of the powerful House Appro-priations defense subcommittee, took up the issue
in mid-June after hearing complaints from “a dozen” Army noncommissioned
officers who told him the ACU’s pattern is ineffective in Afghanistan’s brown
and green countryside.

Murtha gave the Army until
Sept. 30 to come up with a new pat-tern. “We want to work with the Army to
ensure that the current uniform is the right camouflage pattern and that it is
fielded imme-diately,” Murtha told Army Times.

Army officials briefed Murtha
on Sept. 11 about the plan they are launching that includes a camou-flage field
test in Afghanistan.
The effort could lead to the selection of a new camouflage pattern for Afghanistan by
December.

But at the same time, they are
preparing to order 57,000 light-weight armor plate carriers — also for use in Afghanistan —
using the UCP pattern the Army has deter-mined doesn’t work well there.

In a Sept. 14 interview with
Army Times, Brig. Gen. Peter Fuller, commander of Program Executive Office
Soldier, ques-tioned the seriousness of the cam-ouflage pattern’s shortcomings
in Iraq or Afghanistan. “I
have not seen an ONS [operational needs statement] from either theater say-ing
they have a camouflage prob-lem: ‘Go get me an alternative,’ ” Fuller said.
“This is the challenge that we do have — on one side we are trying to be
responsive, and on the other side, we are trying to be responsible. If we hear
soldiers say, ‘We have a problem,’ [then] show me the problem.” Those problems
are well-known to Army leaders familiar with the service’s own studies of the
issue.

The most recent of these,
“Photo-simulation Camouflage Detection Test,” conducted by U.S. Army Natick
Soldier Research, Develop-ment between March 2007 and March 2009, pitted the
current UCP pattern against alternative camouflage patterns. Four outper-formed
the Army Combat Uni-form’s UCP.

The Marine Corps desert
digital, MultiCam, Desert Brush and a Syrian military pattern all “improved the
soldier ’s visual detectability by decreasing the detection distance by a
minimum of 16 percent in the desert and woodland environments as com-pared to
the target wearing UCP,” the report states.

All four patterns performed 16
percent to 36 percent better than the UCP across the woodland, desert and urban settings of the test, the report shows.

Army Times filed a Freedom of
Information Act request Aug. 18 after Army officials refused requests for the report. It was delivered nearly a month later.

According to the 2009 Natick report, the first Natick study, called “Computerized Visual Cam-ouflage Evaluation,” conducted between November 2005 and July 2006, found that “MultiCam per-formed significantly better than the UCP in most conditions.” Army Special Operations Com-mand has tested MultiCam in dif-ferent environments worldwide, including Iraq
and Afghanistan,
and found that it outperformed the ACU’s pattern. It is being con-sidered as the future pattern of Army special operations forces.

The Army held a round-table
discussion with reporters at the Pentagon Sept. 16 — one day after the Army Times Web site posted a story on the UCP’s poor perfor-mance in the Natick study fin-ished in 2009 — to discuss the details about the service’s broad camouflage strategy.

The event featured high-level
officials such as Dean Popps, the service’s acquisition chief, who rarely attends such discussions.

“Any notion, and I repeat, any
notion that we are passive or that we do things in a serial fashion instead of a comprehensive fashion is simply false,” he said. “We are very actively engaged in the seri-ousness of taking care of soldiers.” Uniform officials also invited Col. Scott McBride to talk about his views on camouflage in Iraq and Afghanistan.

McBride commanded the 25th
Infantry Division’s 2nd Battalion, 35th Infantry Regiment, in Afghanistan in 2005 and 1st Brigade Combat Team of the 101st Airborne Division (Air Assault) in 2007 and 2008 in Iraq.

In both areas, McBride
described the terrain as too diverse for any one camouflage pattern. McBride said camouflage “wasn’t at the top of the list” of combat priorities such as force protection, communi-cations, supplies and medical-evac-uation support.

“Camouflage is important, but
it was not the most important factor in keeping our soldiers alive,” he said.

It’s important enough,
however, for the Army to kick off a multi-phase camouflage effort aimed at
addressing the terrain in Afghanistan
by December and future battlefields in the long term. “The Natick
study and what we are experiencing in Afghanistan right now is making us
question: ‘Should we have a universal pat-tern or should we have specific
patterns?’ We still don’t know,” Col. Bill Cole, project manager for Soldier
Protection and Individual Equipment, said at the briefing.

By early October, Army uniform
officials plan to outfit one battal-ion with new uniforms featuring a
camouflage pattern that PEO Sol-dier is calling “UCP-Delta,” which is the
current Universal Camou-flage Pattern with a new color, “coyote brown,” blended
into it. At the same time, the Army will supply another battalion with uni-forms in
MultiCam, a camouflage pattern already worn in combat by Army special
operations forces.

In addition to rushing the new
UCP-Delta and MultiCam to Afghanistan,
uniform officials will take eight camouflage patterns to the country to conduct
a new study using the photosimulation methods featured in the second Natick study.

That test sought to evaluate
the detection performance of 18 “stan-dard, foreign and experimental” patterns
during daylight using NATO’s Research and Technology Organization’s guidelines
for pho-tosimulation data collection and analysis.

The 2009 Natick report raises questions as to why PEO
Soldier overlooked the Marine desert digi-tal, MultiCam and Desert Brush
patterns in 2004 and chose the UCP for its Army Combat Uniform, a decision that
resulted in $5 billion in uniform and equipment costs.

MultiCam, made by Crye Preci-sion
LLC, became a top contender when the Army began looking for a new camouflage
design in 2002 to replace the Battle Dress and Desert Camouflage uniforms. In
September 2003, uniform officials narrowed their search from a dozen patterns
to two: “urban track” and MultiCam, which was then known as “Scorpion.” But the
Army passed on Multi-Cam in favor of a new pattern that PEO Soldier created
using a digi-tized version of the urban track pattern and stripping out the
high-ly visible black shade. The new pat-tern became known as the UCP.

Fuller, who took command of
PEO Soldier in 2008, said he did not have data to show Army Times to justify
the UCP selection in light of its poor performance against the three U.S. patterns in the Natick testing. The Syrian pattern was not an
option when the UCP was selected.

“There is no study there that
is available from 2003 and 2004 when that decision was made that says, ‘Here
are all the alternatives and we have down selected to this one,’ ” Fuller said
Sept. 14.

At the Pentagon round-table
dis-cussion, Fuller told reporters the UCP “worked well enough” in woodland, urban and desert envi-ronments when compared with the BDU and DCU.

“Should the aperture have been
open wider? Don’t know; that’s water over the bridge,” Fuller said. Army Materiel Command and the Naval Research Laboratory validated the science used in the Natick
test, Fuller said, but the Army needs more science to back up any future decisions.

“Is the data in that report
good? Yeah, but it has limitations,” Fuller said, pointing to the fact that the test evaluated only soldiers in uni-forms without their combat equip-ment. Also, Fuller criticized the test for using tan buildings for an urban setting.

“These are big-dollar invest-ments,”
Fuller said. “If we are going to make an informed deci-sion, let’s make sure we have some basis of science here, and we are not saying we like this color over that color, because you are going to end up with lots of opinions.” The new test will involve man-nequins dressed in camouflage uni-forms such as UCP, UCP-Delta and MultiCam, said Cole, who would not name all the patterns involved. Two camouflage systems known as AOR 1 and AOR 2 will also be part of the test. In use by Naval Special Warfare personnel, they resemble the Marine desert and woodland digital patterns but fea-ture a material that has a special treatment designed to reduce the wearer ’s infrared signature when viewed by night-vision devices.

Testers will photograph the
pat-terns against varying terrain from distances out to 400 meters.

The test will also feature
body armor and other clothing and indi-vidual equipment, known as OCIE, in UCP, MultiCam, coyote brown, khaki and Ranger green, a color Army special operations forces use.

Once the photosimulation study
is complete, officials will analyze the findings, combine it with feed-back from the two battalions wearing UCP-Delta and Multi-Cam and present recommenda-tions for alternative options to commanders in Afghanistan and Army leaders, Cole said.

By December, Cole said he
hopes to present options for alternative camouflage, “and leadership and commanders can make the deci-sion.” Fuller said the long-term goal of the effort will go beyond the chal-lenges of Afghanistan.

“We are not talking about
doing something in Afghanistan; we are talking about having the science
available so you say, ‘Hey, we are going into this geographical region,
wherever it may be in the world … we could actually run through what that
environment looks like,’ ” Fuller said.

He said it is his hope that
this path will lead the Army to the best camouflage option.

“We are going to go lay this
out and figure out what is the best,” Fuller said. “Then we lay it out to
[Capitol] Hill ... Here is the invest-ment that it will take to get there.

“If means we change out every
OCIE,” he said, “then guess what? That is the best.”